

The “I Know You” and the “You Know Me” of Mutual Goal Knowledge in Partnerships:  
Differential Associations with Partnership Satisfaction and Sense of Closeness Over Time

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## Abstract

Personal goals, that is, ideas of what one wants to maintain, attain, or avoid in the future, are pursued within social contexts and may influence the social systems a person belongs to. Focusing on romantic partnerships as one of the most important social contexts in adulthood, this longitudinal study investigated the role of partners' mutual goal knowledge for partnership development (T1:  $N = 69$  couples, T2:  $N = 47$ ). Partners described their own personal goals and the goals they assumed their partners to have. Trained coders rated the overlap between the self-reported and the ascribed goals. Actor–partner interdependence models showed that knowing one's partner's goals was associated with a higher level of partnership satisfaction after about 16 months, controlling for initial partnership satisfaction. Having a partner who knows one's goals, by contrast, predicted greater feelings of closeness to that partner after the same period of time, controlling for initial levels of closeness; and this association could not be attributed to a greater similarity between both partners' goals. Overall, this research shows that both the “I know you” and the “You know me” components contribute to positive partnership development, and that their specific implications vary for different facets of partnership quality.

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Making plans or setting oneself goals is a central aspect of human motivation. Goals are ideas of what one wants to attain, maintain, or avoid in the future (see Pervin, 1989). They represent reference values that initiate and organize thought, behaviour, and emotional experiences, and are thus among the qualities that make up the uniqueness of the individual (e.g., Freund & Riediger, 2006). Human existence is inherently social and can be best understood by considering that individuals are part of social systems (e.g., Baltes & Staudinger, 1996; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). Yet, so far, most research on personal goals has focused on individuals, without regard for the social context. With the aim to contribute to the understanding of how individual motivation is embedded in, and influences, social systems, we focused on one of the most important social contexts for many adults—romantic partnerships. We investigated the role that partners’ mutual knowledge of each other’s goals plays for partnership development.

Is it necessary for partners to know each other well in order for their relationship to thrive? Neff and Karney (e.g., 2005) posit that healthy relationships are not only characterized by perceiving one’s partner in an enhancing (although not necessarily realistic) light at a global level of evaluation, but also by having accurate knowledge of the specific characteristics of one’s partner. The research reported here derives from the assumption that personal goals are among these specific characteristics that partners need to know of each other so that romantic relationships do well.

We propose to distinguish between two components of mutual goal knowledge in partnerships, with the “I know you” component referring to the extent to which a person knows his or her partner’s goals, and the “You know me” component characterizing the extent to which this person’s goals are known by his or her partner. Our central hypothesis

was that both of these components are associated with positive development in partnership-related thoughts and feelings. This prediction is in line with prior evidence obtained from research investigating mutual knowledge of personality traits and behaviours, which showed that interpreting one's partner's feelings and behaviour accurately ("I know you") can enhance various aspects of relationship quality, such as satisfaction, mutual support, or stability (e.g., Acitelli, Douvan, & Veroff, 1993; Feeney, 2004; Ickes, 1997; Neff & Karney, 2005; Sanderson & Cantor, 1997). There is also prior evidence for the assumed importance of the "You know me" component. For example, individuals have been found to experience more intimacy in their partnership if their self-perceptions of personality traits correspond to the way they are perceived by their partner (Swann Jr., De La Ronde, & Hixon, 1994).

Previous research has mostly investigated relationships between how accurately partners know each other and various aspects of relationship quality, with assessment taking place at about the same time. An aim of our study was to illuminate the role that partners' mutual goal knowledge plays in partnership development *over time*. Furthermore, most past studies focused on aspects related to either the "I know you" or the "You know me" component. We therefore aimed to address the impact of *both* components within the same study, and to disentangle their effects from that of mutual similarity between the partners' goals. Finally, the question of whether different facets of partners' mutual knowledge of each other might be differentially associated with various aspects of relationship quality represented another, as yet unexplored avenue. To this end, we investigated associations with two distinct dimensions of relationship quality, namely relationship satisfaction and interpersonal closeness.

We predicted the "I know you" and "You know me" components to be differentially related to these two outcomes of partnership quality. We assumed that people know their partners' goals better the more similar these are to their own goals (because own goals serve

as valid references in such constellations). However, we expected the effects of “I know you” and “You know me” on partnership outcomes not to be due merely to greater goal similarity. Relationship satisfaction derives to some extent from people’s evaluations of how well their partner and partnership correspond to their respective expectations (e.g., Hendrick, 1988). The expectations one has of one’s partner may be more realistic, and thus more likely to be met, if one knows one’s partner’s goals, which reflect his or her preferences and future orientation. Furthermore, knowing one’s partner’s goals also enables one to support the achievement of these goals in a more effective way, which is another important source of partnership satisfaction (e.g., Feeney, 2004; Fitzsimons & Shah, 2008). We therefore assumed that the “I know you” component of mutual goal knowledge would be especially important for the positive development of *partnership satisfaction* over time.

Experiencing closeness to one’s partner, the second facet of partnership quality that we focused on in this research, has been characterized as feeling to have access to one’s partner’s resources and perspectives (e.g., Aron, Mashek, & Aron, 2004). This may derive from feeling understood and cared for by one’s partner (Reis & Shaver, 1988), which, in turn, may be more likely to occur when one’s partner knows one’s goals, as this provides the basis for him or her to be considerate and supportive of one’s aspirations. We therefore expected the “You know me” component of mutual goal knowledge to be of particular importance for the positive development of *interpersonal closeness* over time.

## Method

### *Sample*

The couples who participated in the study were recruited via advertisements in newspapers, leisure facilities, and universities in Berlin, Germany. In order to reduce the impact of potentially confounding factors and due to the fact that the couples’ current living situation (e.g., living apart versus cohabiting) and familial situation (e.g., having children

versus being childless) might influence the nature of mutual goal knowledge in partnerships, we imposed the following inclusion criteria: only heterosexual couples with partners aged between 20 and 40 years were recruited; the couples also had to be cohabiting, (still) childless, and to have been together for at least one year. Sixty-nine couples (i.e., 138 people) participated in the first assessment session (21.23–38.82 years of age,  $M = 28.45$ ,  $SD = 3.63$ ). Relationship duration ranged from 1.03 to 12.31 years ( $M = 4.75$ ,  $SD = 2.62$ ).

### *Procedure*

The study comprised two assessment sessions with an average interval of 15.74 months ( $SD = .99$ ). In each of these sessions both members of the couple completed a set of questionnaires, working independently and at the same time. They were not able to communicate with each other during the sessions.

In the first session (T1), participants reported their own goals for the near future, followed by the goals they assumed their partners had. Afterwards, participants completed measures of interpersonal closeness and partnership satisfaction. Three external coders then rated how well both partners knew each other's goals. Two other coders rated the similarity of the goals reported by both partners. After around 16 months, the second session (T2) was held, which included a re-assessment of closeness and partnership satisfaction. Participants received financial remuneration for taking part in the study. The local ethics committee had approved of the study.

Of the 69 couples participating in T1, 47 (68.1%) also participated in T2. Of the 22 couples who did not participate in the second session, 5 couples (23.8%) did so because they were no longer together, 13 couples (59.1%) dropped out for other reasons, and 4 couples (18.2%) did not provide the reasons for ending their participation. Selectivity analyses indicated that selective sample attrition was within the acceptable range. Linear mixed models showed that participants who took part in T2 did not differ from those who did not participate

again in the study in the central study variables assessed at T1 (i.e., the “I know you” and the “You know me” components of mutual goal knowledge, relationship satisfaction, and interpersonal closeness; all  $ps > .35$ ).

### *Measures*

#### *Personal Goals (T1)*

At T1, participants described their current goals in an open response format. They were instructed to note any goals that they had for the near future and which they regarded as being important at that particular time and likely to continue being important in the coming months. Participants had 10 minutes to complete this task. There was no mention of the number of goals they were expected to list ( $M = 6.74$ ,  $SD = 2.51$ ). Some examples of reported goals included: “*Start a family*” (male, 32 years), “*Go out more often (theater, cinema...)*” (female, 23 years), “*Successful graduation from university*” (male, 25 years), “*Maintaining a good balance between private life and job*” (female, 33 years).

#### *Goals Ascribed to One’s Partner (T1)*

Next, participants were asked to describe *their partner’s* goals in an open response format. Participants once again had 10 minutes to complete this task. Again, the number of goals they were supposed to give was not specified ( $M = 5.77$ ,  $SD = 2.06$ ).

#### *Knowledge of Partner’s Goals (T1)*

Three independent, trained coders then rated the correspondence between participants’ self-reported goals and the goals their respective partners had ascribed to them. One of the coders rated all goals, with two additional coders rating about 30% and 70% of the goals each, respectively. Inter-rater agreement as measured by Cohen’s Kappa was .72. Ratings that initially deviated between coders were discussed and coded according to consensus. For each goal on both lists (i.e., self-reported and ascribed goals), coders evaluated whether it was *identical*, *similar*, or *neither identical nor similar* to any of the goals listed by the



respective partner. As a basis for their ratings, the coders identified the general theme and the specific attributes of each goal. A goal was rated as *identical* to a goal on the other list (coding 2) when both goals corresponded in terms of their general theme *and* their specific details. A goal was rated as *similar* to a goal on the other list (coding 1) when both goals corresponded in their general theme, but not in their specific details. A goal was rated as *not corresponding* to any goal on the other list (coding 0) if its general theme did not match any of the goals listed by the respective partner. We then obtained the mean of all ratings (across partner-ascribed and the respective partners' self-reported goals) to serve as indicators of the "You know me" and "I know you" components of mutual goal knowledge ( $M = 0.51$ ,  $SD = 0.30$ ). The "I know you" component refers to the extent to which a person knows his or her partner's goals, while the "You know me" component characterizes the extent to which this person's goals are known by his or her partner.

#### *Similarity Between Both Partner's Goals (T1)*

Two other independent coders rated the similarity between the personal goals independently reported by each partner. For each personal goal reported by the one partner, they separately determined whether the personal goals listed by the other partner included an *identical*, a *similar*, or *neither* an identical *nor* a similar goal. The coding rationale was the same as described above. Inter-rater agreement as measured by Cohen's Kappa was .72. Ratings that initially deviated between the coders were discussed and coded according to consensus. We then obtained the mean of all ratings across a person's goals to serve as an indicator of similarity to the goals reported by his or her partner ( $M = 0.29$ ,  $SD = 0.26$ ).

#### *Partnership Satisfaction (T1 and T2)*

The *Relationship Assessment Scale* (Hendrick, 1988) measures relationship satisfaction using seven items and a five-point rating scale (1–5; T1:  $M = 4.10$ ,  $SD = .66$ , Cronbach's Alpha = .88; T2:  $M = 4.17$ ,  $SD = .62$ , Cronbach's Alpha = .89). Item examples of

the scale are, “In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?” and “How much do you love your partner?”.

### *Interpersonal Closeness (T1 and T2)*

The *Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale* is a pictorial measure of feelings of closeness to one’s partner that has good psychometric properties and well-established validity (Aron & Aron, 1997; Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992). Seven pictures show two circles that vary in their degree of overlap, ranging from no overlap (1) to extensive overlap (7). Participants selected the picture that best described their relationship (T1:  $M = 4.85$ ,  $SD = 1.43$ ; T2:  $M = 4.78$ ,  $SD = 1.25$ ).

## Results

In the analyses reported below, we applied the Actor–Partner-Interdependence Model (APIM, e.g., Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006), which takes into account interdependencies within dyadic datasets and allows statistical modelling of the mutual influence that partners may exert on each other. The independent variables in all tested models were grand-mean centred before being used for analysis. To implement our models, we used the MIXED procedure in SPSS 15. Following the recommendations of Kenny et al. (2006), we requested restricted maximum likelihood estimation (REML), treatment of individual scores as repeated measures within dyads, and—if not otherwise specified—treatment of non-independence between dyad members as equal (compound symmetry).

A first set of analyses was concerned with the questions of whether people know their partners’ goals better the more similar these are to their own goals, and of how goal similarity is related to partnership satisfaction and interpersonal closeness. APIM analyses of bivariate associations revealed that the more similar participants’ goals were to those of their partners, the better participants knew their partners’ goals (standardized parameter estimate: 0.34,  $p < .001$ ), and the better their own goals were known by their partners (standardized parameter

estimate: 0.35,  $p < .001$ ). Similarity of participants' goals to those of their partners was unrelated to relationship satisfaction assessed at T1 ( $p = .20$ ), and not predictive of change in relationship satisfaction over time, that is, not predictive of relationship satisfaction at T2 when controlling for satisfaction at T1 ( $p = .15$ ). It was, however, predictive of higher interpersonal closeness at T1. That is, the more similar participants' goals were to those of their partners, the closer participants felt towards their partners (standardized parameter estimate: .23,  $p = .01$ ). Goal similarity was also predictive of higher interpersonal closeness assessed at T2, even when controlling for closeness at T1 (standardized parameter estimate: .21,  $p = .01$ ).

A second series of analyses was carried out to test whether the "I know you" and "You know me" components of goal knowledge predicted concomitant or subsequent partnership satisfaction and closeness. To investigate concomitant associations between the two aspects of mutual goal knowledge and facets of partnership quality, we first ran two models with interpersonal closeness and partnership satisfaction at T1 as the dependent variables. The independent variables were participants' knowledge of their partner's goals at T1 ("I know you") and the knowledge these partners had of them in terms of their goals at T1 ("You know me"). Neither the "I know you" component nor the "You know me" component was significantly related to partnership satisfaction or sense of closeness in these analyses ( $ps > .05$ ).

Following that, we investigated associations of the "I know you" and "You know me" components with interpersonal closeness and partnership satisfaction *over time*. Again, we specified two models with satisfaction at T2 (the left-hand columns in Table 1) and closeness at T2 (the right-hand columns in Table 1) as dependent variables. The independent variables were the participants' initial (i.e. T1) scores for satisfaction and closeness respectively and the "I know you" and "You know me" components assessed at T1. The results show that both

facets of mutual goal knowledge were differentially predictive of partnership satisfaction and closeness over time when initial evaluations of satisfaction and closeness were controlled for (i.e., of regressed T1-T2 change in the dependent variables; Cohen, West, Cohen, & Aiken, 2002).

The “I know you” component of goal knowledge was unrelated to interpersonal closeness at T2, but associated with higher partnership satisfaction at T2, even after controlling for initial levels of partnership satisfaction at T1. Overall, this model accounted for 37.5% of the residual variance of partnership satisfaction reported at T2. Comparing the model with a reduced variant revealed that the “I know you” component uniquely accounted for 2.5% of the residual variance in T2 partnership satisfaction, above and beyond all other model predictors.

By contrast, the “You know me” component was unrelated to partnership satisfaction at T2, but associated with a higher sense of closeness at T2, even after controlling for initial levels of interpersonal closeness at T1. Overall, this model accounted for 52.8% of the residual variance of closeness reported at T2. Comparing the model with a reduced variant revealed that the “You know me” component uniquely accounted for 4.5% of the residual variance in the sense of closeness at T2, above and beyond all other model predictors.

Based on our results regarding goal similarity (see above), we next addressed the question of whether the effect of the “You know me” component on enhanced interpersonal closeness observed at T2 might be driven by a higher similarity between both partners’ personal goals. Repeating the analyses summarized in the right-hand columns of Table 1 by including goal similarity as an additional predictor of interpersonal closeness at T2, however, did not alter the pattern of results reported above. That is, even after controlling for goal similarity and initial levels of interpersonal closeness at T1, the “You know me” component remained predictive of a higher sense of closeness at T2 (standardized parameter estimate:

0.19,  $p = .016$ ), showing that the effect of the “You know me” component on enhanced interpersonal closeness at a subsequent point was not merely driven by a greater similarity between both partners’ goals.

--Table 1 about here --

Supplementary analyses revealed that the effects reported in Table 1 also remained significant ( $ps < .05$ ) after controlling for partnership duration, both partners’ age, the number of goals partners reported for themselves, and the number of goals that partners ascribed to the other. We also tested whether the significant effects shown in Table 1 were moderated by any of these control variables. This was not the case (i.e., all interactions  $ps > .05$ ). We further tested whether the associations in Table 1 could be distinguished regarding gender. With this aim, we first tested for gender interactions in the effects of the “I know you” and “You know me” components. None could be found in any of the models tested ( $ps > .05$ ). We also followed the recommendations of Kenny et al. (2006) and tested whether the model fit improved significantly when allowing for different variances between men and women (i.e. when specifying heterogeneous compound symmetry instead of compound symmetry). According to the likelihood ratio test on the change in REML deviance, this was not the case for any of the models ( $ps > .05$ ). In a final set of supplementary analyses, we followed Kenny and Cook’s (1999) recommendations and included the absolute difference of both partners’ knowledge of each others’ goals as an additional predictor, thus testing whether the degree of between-partner dissimilarity in knowing the other’s goals significantly contributed to the predictions. Again, this was not the case in any of the models reported above ( $ps > .05$ ).

## Discussion

This research aimed to contribute to the understanding of how human motivation is embedded in, and influences, an individual’s social context. We addressed this research field by focusing on the example of romantic relationships as one of the most important social

contexts across adulthood, and by investigating the question whether romantic partners' knowledge of each other's goals is related to how their partnership's social system develops over time. We conceived of mutual goal knowledge as a phenomenon with two aspects—having a partner who knows one's goals and knowing one's partner's goals—and investigated relationships with two facets of partnership quality, namely partnership satisfaction and interpersonal closeness.

While both components of goal knowledge were initially unrelated to the two partnership outcomes, they did predict change differentially in these outcomes over time. The aspect of knowing one's partner's goals was predictive of being more satisfied with the partnership after about 16 months, even when initial partnership satisfaction was controlled for. By contrast, the aspect of having a partner who knows one's goals was predictive of feeling closer to this partner after about 16 months, even when controlling for initial differences in closeness, a fact which could not be attributed to a higher similarity between both partners' goals.

Evaluations of partnership satisfaction derive, at least partly, from comparisons between the reality of the partnership and the individual's respective expectations of it. The better participants knew their partners' goals at the outset of our study, the more realistic their expectations of their partners may have been, with their partners hence being more likely to behave in such a way as to conform to these expectations. Among participants with better knowledge of their partners' goals, this may have contributed to the higher levels of partnership satisfaction at the end of the study. Furthermore, having a better knowledge of their partners' goals may have provided participants with more opportunities to support their partner effectively, which has also been shown to be among the determinants of partnership satisfaction (e.g., Feeney, 2004; Fitzsimons & Shah, 2008).

Feeling close to one's partner is derived in part from the feeling that one has access to one's partner's resources and perspectives (e.g., Aron, et al., 2004), and from feeling understood and cared for by him or her (Reis & Shaver, 1988). During the study interval, these experiences and feelings may have been more prevalent among participants whose partners knew their goals well, as these partners thus had a better basis for being considerate, understanding, and supportive. This may have contributed to more intense feelings of interpersonal closeness at the end of the study interval, even after initial differences in closeness were controlled for. It might appear equally plausible to assume that this trend also runs in the other direction. That is, participants could have been more likely to disclose their goals to partners to whom they feel close. Interestingly however, and not in line with this idea, the "You know me" component of goal knowledge was initially unrelated to interpersonal closeness, with significant associations only evolving over time.

The two components of goal knowledge were initially (i.e., at T1) unrelated to the two outcomes of partnership quality, while predicting relationship quality as measured at T2. One possible reason for this differential pattern is that our instruction aimed at eliciting relatively short-term goals for the near future (rather than long-term life goals) that in many cases may not have been held by the participants for a long time. This may be one reason why the positive effects of the various facets of mutual goal knowledge for partnership quality only evolved over time. (Note that the differential associations of components of personal goal knowledge with partnership-quality outcomes assessed at T1 versus T2 were not due to the fact that the cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses involved different sample sizes. Analyzing cross-sectional associations in the restricted longitudinal sample yielded the same patterns of results.) This finding suggests that mutual goal knowledge in partnerships may not necessarily be a stable characteristic, but can fluctuate over time. Whether this is indeed the case remains an interesting question for future studies.

Although the present longitudinal findings provide some support for the assumption that mutual goal knowledge shapes partnership development over time, strong causal conclusions cannot yet be drawn on the basis of the data available. Hence, at present, the above considerations are speculative. Investigating possible mechanisms that underlie the associations observed is an intriguing task for future experimental research. Another limitation of this study is that the generalizability of findings may be limited due to the relative homogeneity of the sample investigated. Despite these limitations, this research contributes to the understanding of the role that mutual knowledge of personal goals plays in partnership development. It demonstrates that both the “I know you” and the “You know me” components are characteristic of partnerships that thrive over time, and that their specific implications vary depending on the particular facet of partnership quality being considered.



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Table 1.

*“You Know Me” and “I Know You” Components of Personal Goal Knowledge in Partnerships Differentially Predict Sense of Closeness and Partnership Satisfaction Over Time: Results of Actor–Partner-Interdependence Models*

	Partnership Satisfaction at T2			Sense of closeness at T2		
	Unstd.	Std.	<i>p</i>	Unstd.	Std.	<i>p</i>
Fixed effects						
Intercept	4.16	0.00	.000	4.73	0.00	.000
Partnership satisfaction at T1	<b>0.60</b>	<b>0.60</b>	<b>.000</b>	–	–	–
Sense of closeness at T1	–	–	–	<b>0.62</b>	<b>0.65</b>	<b>.000</b>
“You know me” at T1	-0.07	-0.03	.729	<b>1.08</b>	<b>0.23</b>	<b>.002</b>
“I know you” at T1	<b>0.43</b>	<b>0.18</b>	<b>.029</b>	0.33	0.07	.328
Explained variance		37.48%			52.81%	

*Note.* Unstd. = Unstandardized parameter estimate. Std. = Standardized parameter estimate.

The “I know you” component of personal goal knowledge refers to the extent to which a person knows his or her partner’s goals, while the “You know me” component characterizes the extent to which this person’s goals are known by his or her partner.